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Carol X Weakley 10/17/2006 02:42:14 PM From DB/Inbox: Carol X Weakley

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ACTION: POL
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DISSEMINATION: POL
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: CDA:GACRETZ
DRAFTED: POL:MCKEAYS, POL/C:MS
CLEARED: DAO:DO'MEARA

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEL AVIV 004069

SIPDIS

PENTAGON FOR OSD ISRAEL DESK (ANDERSON)
JOINT STAFF FOR J-5
HQ USEUCOM FOR ECJ5-E (KLOTHE)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/13/2016
TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER MASS SY LE IR IS
SUBJECT: TWO FORMER IDF CHIEFS OF STAFF OFFER OPPOSING
VIEWS ON SYRIA

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Gene A. Cretz.
Reason: 1.4 (b) (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) In separate meetings September 22 and October 10, former IDF Chiefs of Staff Amnon Lipkin-Shahak and Moshe Yaalon provided POL and DAO sharply differing assessments of how Israel should deal with Syria. These assessments mirror a broader debate in Israel, with political commentators and politicians staking out positions in response to Syrian President Bashar Asad's recent comments suggesting he was interested in resuming negotiations with Israel over the return of the Golan Heights. Lipkin-Shahak, who was engaged with the negotiations with Syria conducted by former Prime Ministers Rabin and Barak, told emboffs September 22 that he believes Israel should open up a dialogue with Syria, and push for a peace treaty with security guarantees in exchange for the Golan Heights. He urged the U.S. support an Israeli initiative toward Syria that would lure Damascus away from its alliance with Tehran. Retired IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon, by contrast, told Pol Couns and DATT October 10 that the timing was wrong for Israel to engage Syria. Yaalon urged a more assertive Israeli and U.S. posture, saying Iran and Syria needed to pay a price for their backing of Hizballah and Hamas. Arguing that "the best defense is a good offense," Yaalon called for a concerted U.S. effort to undermine the Syrian regime. END SUMMARY.

A TALE OF TWO GENERALS

¶2. (C) In the self-critical atmosphere surrounding the aftermath of the Lebanon war, a number of retired senior IDF officers have offered statements and interviews to the press.

We arranged meetings recently with former Chiefs of Staff Lipkin-Shahak and Yaalon to reestablish embassy contact with two retired generals with potential political ambitions on opposite ends of the Israeli political mainstream. Amnon Lipkin-Shahak, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, served as a military adviser to former Prime Minister Rabin and was Chief of Staff when Prime Minister Ehud Barak was negotiating with Syrian President Hafiz Al-Asad. Former Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon, who is mentioned in the press as a possible Minister of Defense if Bibi Netanyahu stages a political comeback, was IDF Chief of Staff during the later phases of Sharon's campaign against Arafat's PA. Yaalon also planned and carried out air strikes against a terrorist training camp inside Syria in October ¶2003.

LIPKIN-SHAHAK: ENGAGE SYRIA NOW

¶3. (C) Lipkin-Shahak told Pol Couns, Navy Attaché, and Pol-Mil Officer September 22 that he saw an opportunity to lure Syria away from Iran. The only way to achieve this was through direct dialogue with the Syrians. Noting that he had been impressed by his former Syrian counterpart, General Hikmet Shihabi, during Israel's negotiations with the Syrians in 1999-2000. Lipkin-Shahak said that the U.S. and Israel should now try to separate Syria from Iran and push Syria "out of the international terrorism game" through positive engagement. In his view, this is a worthwhile endeavor, even if the chance of success is low, which is how he assessed the current situation. He said he hoped the U.S. would not oppose an Israeli decision to engage Syria.

THERE ARE SYRIANS WHO CARE ABOUT SYRIA INTERESTS

¶4. (C) Lipkin-Shahak expressed his view that Bashar Al-Asad is a "weak personality and leader." Lipkin-Shahak stressed that Syria has interests like any state, and that these should be considered in approaching it. He cautioned, however, that nothing should be given to the Syrians before they surrender the unacceptable aspects of their political agenda. Lipkin-Shahak said that he believes that there are elements in Syria that can be convinced that they can gain from changing Syria's current course. These persons, he suggested, are worried about Syria's overall future, and not only about their own bank accounts.

¶5. (C) The general lamented, however, what he described as a stagnation in Israeli thinking on Syria: "I doubt seriously that anyone in the Israeli government is thinking about how to get Syria to change its course. This is unfortunate, as Israel has nothing to lose, and can only gain."

Lipkin-Shahak observed that Syria is weak by every standard, even though the regime manages to hold on. He noted that it makes no sense from a religious perspective for Syria to fall any deeper into Iran's embrace. Iran's brand of Shia fanaticism is a serious threat to Syria's secular regime, the people, and even the Muslim Brotherhood. It is strengthening radical elements in Syria, and runs counter to the ideology of the Ba'ath movement. Lipkin-Shahak observed that Syrian military capabilities have deteriorated significantly since the 1980's. He noted, however, that the Syrian military has improved its nonconventional capabilities, especially chemical weapons along with ground-to-ground missile capability in particular. He questioned the wisdom on Israel's part of withdrawing unilaterally from Lebanon in 2000 without a peace agreement with Syria.

ISRAEL MUST BE PREPARED TO RETURN THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

¶6. (C) Lipkin-Shahak said that Syria wants the Golan Heights back from Israel, and Bashar has made it clear that there can be no peace agreement with Israel without their return. He said that in the Shepherdstown talks, it became apparent to him that the gap between the Israeli and Syrian negotiating positions was smaller than most people thought. He envisioned that the negotiations would, in the end, only involve deals on "a few meters of land here and there." The question is, 'What kind of peace you will have.'" Lipkin-Shahak acknowledged that the heights -- and especially Mount Hermon -- are of strategic importance to Israel as long as there is no peace between Israel and Syria, and there is a threat emanating from Syria. The Syrians would accept an early warning station and demilitarization of major parts of the Golan Heights. Israel, he said, should only go into the details after there is certainty that it has a real negotiating partner in Syria: "We would not want to give something to Bashar Asad only for his own internal benefit." He stressed that the Israel should look for an opening and pursue it. "This would be a big failure for Iran, increase stability in Lebanon, and raise security along the Syrian-Iraq border."

NOW NOT THE TIME FOR NEGOTIATIONS

¶7. (C) In an October 10 meeting with Pol Couns and DATT, General Moshe Yaalon offered a diametrically opposed assessment. Yaalon, who has publicly called for the resignations of IDF Chief of Staff Halutz, Prime Minister Olmert, and Defense Minister Peretz over what he described as their "mismanagement" of the Lebanon war, stressed that he opposed engaging Syria. Israel's past negotiations with Syria may have been appropriate at the time, Yaalon said, but now it was necessary to "make Syria pay a price" for its support for Hamas and Hizballah. Yaalon said that in 2003, Syria and Iran were afraid of Israel and the U.S. because of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Israel's actions against Arafat. Now, however, there was a danger that Syria and Iran believed that the U.S. and Israel were on the defensive, both in Iraq and against Hamas and Hizballah.

¶8. (C) Arguing that "the best defense is a good offense," Yaalon urged active U.S. and Israeli efforts to undermine the Syrian regime. If Bashar felt threatened, he said, he would be less inclined to take risks. Yaalon suggested that during the Lebanon war, Israel should have bombed Syrian targets as a warning. Yaalon was highly critical of public statements by Olmert and Peretz in which they offered assurances that Israel would not strike Syria, since that only served to make the Syrians believe that there would not be any consequences for their actions.

¶9. (C) Turning to Gaza, Yaalon said the IDF had the capability to suppress Qassam rocket fire, but it would take a sustained and determined ground campaign to make it work. He predicted that a major clash was coming in Gaza, since Hamas was learning from Hizballah and was upgrading its ground to ground and anti-tank rocket capabilities. Concerted U.S. and Israeli action, using a range of tools including but not limited to military power, was needed simultaneously against Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hizballah in order to reverse their impression that the regional tide had turned in their favor.

¶10. (C) Offering his views on the future of the region, however, Yaalon said he thought the U.S. and Israel should support democratization and back democratic civil society elements in the Arab world and Iran. Democratic transformation, however, could take twenty years, as the entire political culture of the region had to change. In the meantime, it was necessary to prevail over Iran.

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